

Ebbinghaus was lecturing on "the social doctrines of the Reformation and the Enlightenment." In "A Giving of Accounts" he particularly recalls Ebbinghaus's lively presentation of Hobbes. See *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. and trans. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 461.

1. "open the old tome": orig.: *den alten Folianten aufzuschlagen*. In his later, English writings, Strauss uses the expression "the old books."

2. "not a natural one": the phrase *ist nicht natürlich* appears also in a 1932 lecture manuscript (GS, 2:445): "Unterstellen wir also, diese Frage sei eindeutig—sie ist jedenfalls *nicht natürlich*."

3. The teacher of "knowing about not-knowing" is Socrates (see the continuation).

4. The notion of a "second cave" makes its first appearance in "Religious Situation of the Present" (GS, 2:386–87, 389). It returns in "Die geistige Lage der Gegenwart" (1932) (GS, 2:456), in *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Berlin: Schocken, 1935), 14n, 46, and elsewhere. Cf. Heinrich Meier, *Die Denkbewegung von Leo Strauss: Die Geschichte der Philosophie und die Intention des Philosophen* (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler Verlag, 1996), 21–28, 42f. Also see the introduction to this volume and cf. GS, 2:xxix n. 40.

### The Testament of Spinoza (1932)

In their judgment of Spinoza, Europe, and Judaism along with it, passed through stages that can be characterized summarily in the following way: condemnation (i.e., the ban pronounced by the Amsterdam community), followed by vindication (Mendelssohn), followed by canonization (Heine, Hess), which was finally followed by neutrality (Joël, Freudenthal). It is obvious that in each of these epochs there were men who did not think as their epoch did. We must mention by name Hermann Cohen who, in the year 1910, found the courage to state openly that Spinoza's "expulsion from the community of Israel was necessary and fully legitimate."<sup>1</sup>

Neutrality toward Spinoza set in once one was able to admit that the "modern worldview," whose victory was decisively aided by Spinoza's metaphysics, does not, or does not entirely, coincide with this metaphysics. But even at this stage it was still generally maintained, and even emphasized, that among the three great Western philosophers of the seventeenth century—Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza—Spinoza was the most important one *because* he was the most progressive one. He alone had drawn certain consequences from the foundations of modern philosophy, which became fully clarified only in the nineteenth century and which henceforth determined the general consciousness.

Meanwhile things have reached the point where the general consciousness is determined by doubt about the "modern worldview." Regardless of the legitimacy of this doubt, it has had the effect of making the "modern worldview" no longer self-evident, so that an advanced student of this worldview is no longer held in particular esteem simply on account of such advancement. If the foundations of the "modern worldview" are being shaken by doubt, then interest necessarily reverts from its classical exponents to the men who laid the foundations of this "world view," namely, to Descartes and Hobbes. If the veneration of Spinoza is to be more than admiration for his talent or character and more than recognition of his historical effect, and if it is to apply to him as a *teacher*, then this veneration must be held in abeyance at least until the legitimacy of the foundations of modern philosophy has been decided.

We have thus begun to think of Spinoza's "radicalism" differently than the past century did. Now we see that the bold innovations of Spinoza were only consequences, rather than foundations. The fact that now gains in importance is that—compared to the significance of Descartes, Hobbes, and Leibniz—Spinoza is only of secondary significance in the history of the core sciences, that is, in the history of natural science, on the one hand, and of natural right, on the other. And the fact that Spinoza achieved more general recognition only toward the end of the eighteenth century is now also understandable: he could be accepted only at the moment when the "*querelle des anciens et des modernes*" within philosophy had been decided on the main point in favor of the moderns, and when what mattered was the restoration, for the purpose of correcting the modern idea, of certain positions of the premodern world that had been knocked over in the first onslaught; for Spinoza—who stood on the foundation of modern philosophy laid by Descartes and Hobbes—had carried along into the modern world, which he already found in existence, the ideal of life of the premodern (ancient-medieval) tradition, the ideal of the (theoretical) knowledge of God.

The (respective) position of Judaism toward Spinoza coincides with the (respective) position of Europe toward him. However, it does not completely coincide with it. Spinoza played a special role in the Judaism of the past century. When what mattered was the justification of the breakup of the Jewish tradition and the entry of the Jews into modern Europe, perhaps no better, but certainly no more convenient, reference offered itself than the appeal to Spinoza. Who was more suitable for undertaking the justification of modern Judaism before the tribunal of the Jewish tradition, on the one hand, and before the tribunal of modern Europe, on the other, than Spinoza, who,

as was almost universally recognized, was a classical exponent of this Europe and who, as one did not grow weary of at least asserting, had thought his thoughts in the spirit of Judaism and by means of Judaism? It is clear that, at a time when modern Europe has been shaken to its foundations, one *can* no longer justify oneself before *this* Europe for the sake of Judaism, nor before Judaism for the sake of *this* Europe, supposing one still wants to do so.

The convulsion of modern Europe led to a renewed self-awareness [*Besinnung*] of Judaism. This renewed awareness did not produce a change in the assessment of Spinoza, at least not always and not immediately: Spinoza remained an authority. To be sure, one no longer needed him, or at least one no longer seemed to need him, for one's self-assertion against the Jewish tradition and against modern Europe. But in the exodus from the new Egypt one saw oneself obliged to take along the bones of the man who had risen to a kinglike position in that land and to convey them to the pantheon of the Jewish nation, which venerated him as one of her greatest sons. No doubt this was done in good faith. But was it right not to have asked about the last will of the man thus honored?

But of what concern is Spinoza's last will to us if what is meant by this is his explicit will? Even Spinoza was bound by the historical conditions under which he lived and thought. In his age, he *had to* come into conflict with Judaism, a conflict in which both sides were right: the Jewish community that had to defend the conditions of Jewish existence in the Diaspora, or as others say, the Jewish "form"; and Spinoza, who was called upon to loosen the rigidity of the content of this "form," that is, the "subterranean Judaism," and thus to initiate the rebirth of the Jewish nation. Several centuries were needed to make Spinoza's critique of the Law sufficiently flexible so that the Law could be acknowledged without believing in its revealed character. At the end of this development stood a generation that was free-spirited enough to be able to accept Spinoza's critique of the Law, and that was even freer than he inasmuch as it had moved beyond the crude alternative: divine or human? revealed or conceived by men? When properly interpreted, not only does Spinoza not stand outside Judaism, he belongs to it as one of its greatest teachers.

Whoever is acquainted with Spinoza's critique of the Law knows that this critique would not have been possible without the foundation of modern philosophy. To be sure, in order to shake the authority of the Bible, Spinoza also refers to certain difficulties in the biblical text. But in order to be able to draw from these difficulties (which had been known long before him) the consequence that the Torah was not written by Moses, and the further consequence that therefore the Torah was not revealed and hence not binding,

he had to presuppose the philosophical critique of the Law that, at least in his case, is tied to the foundation of modern philosophy. Now that this foundation has become doubtful, Spinoza's critique of the Law has also become doubtful; and accordingly, it has also become doubtful whether he should be regarded as a teacher of Judaism.

But then, must a great man whom one wishes to venerate necessarily be a great teacher? Should there not also exist, for example, great and hence venerable heretics [*Irrelehrer*]? And if this great heretic—with respect to whom, incidentally, it has not yet been established that he *was* a heretic—is a Jew, does not the Jewish nation, then, have the right and the duty to remember him proudly and gratefully?

Spinoza was a Jew. It is a certified fact that he was born and educated as a Jew. But should we mention the names of other men, perhaps of equal rank with Spinoza, who were likewise born and educated as Jews, and whom scarcely any Jew would dare to remember proudly and gratefully as a Jew? We need not mention these names, and can indeed regard the proposition as proven, that the Jewish origin and education of a great man, taken by themselves, do not give us the right to claim his greatness for Judaism. Therefore, if one disregards the fact that Spinoza was born and educated as a Jew (a fact from which perhaps not much can be concluded), and if in addition one is not satisfied with vague speculations on Spinoza's Jewish cast of mind; if therefore one wants to know clearly and distinctly where Judaism is lodged in Spinoza's thought, that is, which of Spinoza's decisive ideas bear a peculiarly Jewish imprint—then one will turn with deserved trust to those scholars who have endeavored to determine the Jewish sources of Spinoza's doctrine. A critical examination of what has emerged from these efforts leads to the following result: There is no doubt whatever that Spinoza stands in a relation of the strongest *literary* dependence on Jewish authors. Originally he came to know the philosophical tradition only through the mediation of the Jewish philosophy of the Middle Ages. But what he learned from this philosophy were insights or opinions that he could just as well have adopted from non-Jewish (Muslim or Christian) philosophy of the Middle Ages; it is the common property of the European-Mediterranean tradition. And even if it should at one point come to light that one of Spinoza's *core* doctrines, as found in his works, is found only in the work of one or another Jewish philosopher or theologian of the past, then it would still remain to be *proved* that this doctrine is actually peculiarly Jewish, and that it could not just as well have been conceived by a Greek, a Muslim, or a Christian.

"Good European" that he is, Spinoza takes from the Jewish tradition the common property of European ideas that it conveyed to him—and nothing

else. Thus we believe we have answered the question of whether the Jew as a Jew is entitled to venerate Spinoza. Spinoza belongs not to Judaism, but to the small band of superior minds whom Nietzsche called the "good Europeans." To this community belong *all* the philosophers of the seventeenth century, but Spinoza belongs to it in a special way. Spinoza did not remain a Jew, while Descartes, Hobbes, and Leibniz remained Christians. Thus it is not in accordance with Spinoza's wishes that he be inducted into the pantheon of the Jewish nation. Under these circumstances it seems to us an elementary imperative of Jewish self-respect that we Jews should at last again relinquish our claim on Spinoza. By so doing, we by no means surrender him to our enemies. Rather, we leave him to that distant and strange community of "neutrals" whom one can call, with considerable justice, the community of the "good Europeans." Besides, we must do so out of respect, which we owe him even if we do not owe him veneration. Respect for Spinoza demands that we take his last will seriously; and his last will was neutrality toward the Jewish nation, based on his break with Judaism.

But did Spinoza leave a testament from which this very will follows unambiguously? Is the Jewish nation mentioned at all in his testament? One does not need to seek for this testament in archives that are difficult of access. It can be found toward the end of the third chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

Spinoza says: "If the foundations of the Jewish religion have not rendered the minds of the Jews effeminate [*weibisch*], then I would absolutely believe that someday, given the opportunity and human affairs being so changeable, they (the Jews) will once again establish their empire and God will elect them anew."<sup>2</sup> If we disregard the remark about the renewed divine election of the Jews, which, coming from Spinoza, is nothing but an empty phrase, what remains as his opinion, as his "political testament," is the neutral consideration of the possibility condition [*Möglichkeitsbedingung*] for the restoration of the Jewish state. This possibility condition is that the Jewish religion lose its power over the minds of the Jews because, according to Spinoza, this religion leads to a softening of one's turn of mind [*Verweichlichung der Gesinnung*].<sup>3</sup> That no state can be established in a softened turn of mind requires no proof. But Spinoza's assertion that the Jewish religion enfeebls the mind is extremely questionable; in fact, it is unintelligible. Has Spinoza completely forgotten that this religion gave the victims of the Inquisition the strength to endure the most extreme suffering? No, Spinoza has not forgotten this fact; we know this with complete certainty from his letters. He was simply of the opinion that the strength needed to endure suffering is not the same strength needed to establish and preserve a state, namely, the strength to

command, without which no society can survive. And just as his teacher Machiavelli held Christianity responsible for the corruption of Roman virtue, so Spinoza held Judaism responsible for the impossibility of a restoration of the Jewish state.

It would be risky to deduce from the cited passage that Spinoza is therefore the father of political Zionism. It would be risky not so much because, as everyone knows, there is also an Orthodox, which is to say conservative, political Zionism. Rather, it is because—unlike his contemporary, Isaac de la Peyrère, who proceeded on the basis of similar presuppositions—Spinoza does not actually wish for or demand the restoration of the Jewish state: he merely discusses it. As if condescending from the height of his philosophical neutrality, he leaves it to the Jews to liberate themselves from their religion and thus to obtain for themselves the possibility of reconstituting their state.

The risk of this advice—and at this point one must recall that Spinoza makes it his business to rehabilitate Balaam!<sup>4</sup>—becomes clear if one considers the context in which Spinoza offers it. This context is his contesting of the doctrine of the election of the Jewish nation. More precisely, Spinoza contests the proof of its election found in the fact that the Jewish nation, and no other nation, has preserved itself in spite of the loss of its state and its dispersion over the whole earth. According to Spinoza, this fact is not a miracle but largely the natural consequence of—the rites, which have separated the Jewish nation from the other peoples and have preserved it hitherto and will preserve it forever. In other words, the Jewish nation owes its present and future preservation to its Law, and thus to its religion. And should the Jewish nation now abandon this religion in order to establish its state, which, according to what has been said, it does not need, at least not for the sake of its preservation? The contradiction here is only apparent. It can be proved to be apparent even if one completely disregards the fact that Spinoza could have recommended to the Jews, or could have wished for them, the establishment of their state on grounds other than the interest in the preservation of their nation. It is clear that Spinoza distinguished between the “rites” (the “forms,” as they are often called today) and the “foundations of the religion.” According to his advice, the latter are to be discarded, while the former are to be retained. The foundations of the religion are that *spirit* of the Law that makes the political restoration impossible. Liberated from this spirit, the Law will not only not hamper the political restoration, but it will further guarantee the permanence of the nation, which will now have become political again. The Law as a means of national preservation, or as a form of national life—who does not know this view of Judaism! And did not Spinoza come amazingly close to it, as close as was possible in the “unhistorical” seventeenth century?

To be sure, with this difference: he still perceived an obstacle to the politicization of the Jewish nation in the spirit of the Law. And then, to be sure, with the further difference that should not be completely overlooked, which is that he voiced this view not as a Jew, but as a neutral; and he did not even voice it, but rather just tossed it off.

Should this, then, be what Spinoza's testament is about? Not in this way, not with veiled words and a weary heart, should we bid farewell to Spinoza—if, in fact, we *must* bid farewell to him as someone on whose conscience is a “humanly incomprehensible betrayal” (Cohen) of our nation. For a moment at least, we would like to disregard the popular principles on the strength of which one saw oneself compelled either to canonize Spinoza or to condemn him. It is sufficient that no one has been able to popularize him, no one has been able to turn him into small change, no one has been able to “cut him down to size.” And still we ask whether we owe him veneration? Spinoza will be venerated as long as there are men who know how to appreciate the inscription on his signet ring (“*caute*”)<sup>5</sup> or, to put it plainly: as long as there are men who know what it means to utter [the word]: *independence* [*Unabhängigkeit*].

#### NOTES

Source: “Das Testament Spinozas,” *Bayerische Israelitische Gemeindezeitung* 8, no. 21 (1 November 1932): 322–26, reprinted in GS, 1:415–22.

1. Hermann Cohen, “Ein ungedruckter Vortrag Hermann Cohens über Spinozas Verhältnis zum Judentum,” eingeleitet von Franz Rosenzweig, in *Festgabe zum 10jährigen Bestehen der Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, 1919–1929* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1929), 59. Strauss cites this source again, and more extensively, in his preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. Elsa Sinclair (New York: Schocken, 1965).

2. “Wenn die Grundlagen der jüdischen Religion die Gemüter der Juden nicht weibisch machten. . . .” Cf. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. C. Gebhardt (Hamburg: Meiner, 1955), 75: “Ja, wenn die Grundsätze ihrer Religion ihren Sinn nicht verweichlichen . . .” Cf. also Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 47: “Indeed, were it not that the fundamental principles of their religion discourage manliness . . .” In the original: “*imo nisi fundamenta suae religionis eorum animos effoeminarent . . .*”

3. The phrase *Verweichlichung der Gesinnung* that Strauss uses in this explanatory paraphrase is close to the wording of Gebhardt's translation of the sentence in question. See previous note.

4. Earlier in chapter 3 of *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza adduces the non-Israelite prophet Balaam (cf. Num. 22–24) to argue that, among the ancient Hebrews, legitimate prophecy was not merely thought of as an Israelite property. In Num. 22:6, Balaam's power to bless and curse are described by the king of Moab in the same terms that, according to Genesis 12:3, YHWH pronounced as a special promise to Abra(ha)m.

While the biblical narrative has Balaam bless rather than curse Israel, Jewish tradition considers him a “wicked” [*Balaam ha-resha*] counterfigure to Abraham, representing pride and other vices. See Mishnah Avot 5:19. In a letter by Hermann Badt to Martin Buber from 4 July 1916, the “wicked Balaam” makes an appearance as well, curiously in the context of the famous debate between Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber on Zionism. See Hartwig Wiedebach, “Hermann Cohens Auseinandersetzung mit dem Zionismus,” *JSQ* 6 (1999): 385.

5. *caute* (Lat., adv.): cautiously, safely.